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HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE U.S. AIR FORCE

The National Museum of the United States Air Force is internationally acclaimed as the world's largest and oldest military aviation museum. It is located at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, near Dayton, Ohio, home of the Wright brothers.

The museum's origin dates back to 1923 when it started in the corner of an aircraft hangar at McCook Field near downtown Dayton. From the informal showing of World War I planes and equipment of both the United States and foreign governments, the collection has grown to more than 300 aircraft and missiles, plus thousands of aviation artifacts.

Dayton had an early acquaintance with aviation. The Wright brothers developed their 1903 flyer in Dayton and continued flying at nearby Huffman Prairie between 1904 and 1910. The Army conducted experimental flying at McCook Field during and after World War I.

Area residents donated funds to purchase over 5,000 acres of land in the 1920s to help establish Wright Field as a research center to replace the outgrown McCook Field. The museum moved to Wright Field, and between 1927 and 1935, it occupied 8,100 square feet of space in a laboratory building.

In 1935 the museum got its first real home in the form of a specially designed building at Wright Field costing \$203,000. Funding came through the Works Progress Administration. By this time, the museum collection included more than 3,000 items. But the new home was converted to wartime use in 1941, and the collection went into storage.

At the end of the war, General "Hap" Arnold directed the collection of items for the opening of a National Air Museum. The Air Technical Service Command, predecessor to Air Force Materiel Command, assumed the task of locating aircraft for the new National Air Museum of the Smithsonian Institution. In 1947 the Air Force decided to re-open the Air Force Museum to emphasize aircraft technical developments, using aircraft and equipment not needed by the National Air Museum. Housed in Building 89, the collection was open by appointment only until April 1955 when it was opened to the public. It was located at adjoining Patterson Field in a World War II structure that had housed an engine-overhaul facility. Attendance in 1955 totaled 41,662 visitors. Since then, attendance has spiraled to more than one million visitors a year.

In the early 1960s, the museum built a uniquely designed interior "maze" floor plan that directed visitors along a controlled walkway, unfolding the story of military aviation in chronological sequence.

The museum outgrew the converted World War II building in the early 1960s. Furthermore, the building was neither fireproof nor air conditioned and was unsuitable for properly protecting and displaying the growing, priceless collection. Support posts every 16 feet in one direction and every 50 feet in another, for instance, greatly restricted how and where aircraft could be exhibited.

Thanks to the Air Force Museum Foundation, a philanthropic, non-profit organization founded in 1960, a new \$6 million museum building opened in 1971 on a 400-acre site at historic Wright Field. President Richard M. Nixon highlighted formal dedication ceremonies in September that year. Public

contributions covered the entire cost of the 800-by-240-foot building, which was designed specially for display of aircraft and provided indoor protection for nearly 100 aircraft. The museum added a \$1 million visitor reception center in 1976, again through contributions made by the public to the foundation.

A twin hangar storage facility, housing about 30 aircraft, opened in 1977 on the old Wright Field flight line, about one mile from the main museum complex. Here, visitors may view the museum's presidential aircraft collection and research and development flight test aircraft.

During the 1980s, the museum supervised the development of a Memorial Park on a portion of its 400-acre site. More than 500 memorials have been dedicated to commemorate the military service of individuals and organizations. Interested citizens financed each memorial, whether a tree with a simple plaque or an elaborate granite monument.

A major museum expansion, the Modern Flight Gallery opened in April 1988. The foundation and federal government jointly funded the \$10.8 million facility, which is parallel to and similar in appearance to the 1971 museum building. The building currently chronicles the Korean and Southeast Asia Wars.

In October 1989 the Air Force Museum Foundation awarded a contract to the B.G. Danis Company/Building Division of Dayton for the construction of an IMAX Theatre. The 500-seat IMAX Theatre, constructed in front of and connected to the existing museum buildings, opened in May 1991. An 80-foot-high glass atrium over the expanded lobby serves as the architectural focal point for the entire \$7.3 million complex.

In 2003 the museum opened a 200,000 square-foot third building, the Eugene W. Kettering Building. The centerpiece of the museum's multi-phase expansion, the new building allowed the museum to expand its exhibit space and reconstitute the flow of its galleries into a more chronological order. As a result of the additional space, the museum developed an area dedicated to telling the story of the U.S. Air Force in the Cold War and beyond. This area illuminates the people, technology, missions and weapon platforms that helped democracy triumph over communism.

The next expansion phase, the Missile and Space Gallery, opened in 2004. The gallery functions in concert with the Cold War Gallery to tell the story of the Air Force's vital role in Soviet containment and strategic deterrence, as well as the service's role in space and the importance of space-based capabilities to national security.

The new additions to the main museum complex as well as the two hangars on the old Wright Field flight line provide more than 17 acres of indoor exhibition space — a far cry from the 8,100 square feet of the 1927-1935 era.

In October 2004 the museum announced its official re-designation from the United States Air Force Museum to the National Museum of the United States Air Force. The name underscores the museum's national mission, reinforces its world-class collection, and places it at a name level with industry peers such as the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., the National Museum of Naval Aviation in Pensacola, Florida, and a planned National Museum of the United States Army.

Although the Air Force operates the museum, the foundation operates the IMAX Theatre, Morphis MovieRide Theatre, souvenir shop and cafeteria. Proceeds are used to support museum activities and to remodel or expand museum facilities. "Friends of the Air Force Museum," created by the foundation in 1978, is an organization of aviation enthusiasts who support the museum. For an annual fee, members receive a quarterly *Friends Journal*, discounts in the museum shops, and other benefits.